



# BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005



CLUB AND AIRPORT NEWS

BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT SOCIAL CLUB LTD

In Ass. with BigginHillReunited.co.uk

ISSUE No. 54

[www.bigginhillclub.co.uk](http://www.bigginhillclub.co.uk)

1<sup>st</sup> August 2009

## GRAND GARDEN PARTY

A truly momentous 'Garden Party' to celebrate the life and times of Gordon Franks was held in the grounds of his home at Leighbridge, Kent, on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2009. No less than 150



people (possibly 200) turned out bringing picnic baskets, dogs, and children. Drink was a plenty, and many old acquaintances renewed. The day was further enhanced by a series of discreet flying displays. Two Fourniers opened the proceedings with a smooth, close formation flying display.



A Hog Roast was fired up and during the remainder of day was wholly devoured, leaving nothing but bones. There was also a self



help gas Bar-B-Q which was another successful unit during the afternoon. There was also a

magnificent photographic display arranged by his son Howard, who whilst sorting through hundreds and hundreds of photographs, said "I am learning things about my Fathers life, which I never realised", fantastic..! His final presentation was absolutely concise in portraying Gordon's many activities from racing cars, motor cycles and flying aeroplanes, not



forgetting his attempt to win the first and only 'Perithon' held at Biggin Hill Airfield on the evening of 20<sup>th</sup> July 1984, around the perimeter track after the airfield closed for the night. The picture below shows what he was up against with the lean sinuous professional athletes that invaded the event from the Deptford Harriers Club defeating any attempt, by airfield personalities to win any trophies or prize money. Our exhausted hero



arrived some considerable time later, claiming a place between 1<sup>st</sup> and last. His position has never been disputed, and the record stands to this day. The race was started by the late James Hunt.



1976 Formula 1 World Champion, firing a replica canon. We digress slightly as another formation of aircraft appear over the horizon, with cameras being pointed skywards, to capture these



wonderful moments in time, understood by those of us, who live



to fly, enjoying life to the full, respecting each others ability. As the 'Garden Party' progressed, another aerobatic display by a lone Stampe above Leighbridge was a final salute to Gordon's memory.



Meanwhile the Jazz Band played



on tirelessly, providing the music that Gordon liked best. Hundreds of photographs were taken during the afternoon, some of which appear on the photo gallery pages. If any of our readers would like copies of the original pictures from these collages please email John Bryan as these images have been reduced in size for publication.

< [johnbryan@jbplstd.demon.co.uk](mailto:johnbryan@jbplstd.demon.co.uk) >

Following his retirement from Commercial Flying, Gordon took up model flying in his spare time with the Maidstone Model Flying Club, which met every Wednesday at Headcorn aerodrome, they in turn gained considerable aerodynamic knowledge from Gordon. He built this model below, which appears to have excellent dihedral for extra stability matched by a brilliant colour scheme.



## ONE CHURCH TWO PUBS

The old Victorian joke which said, 'Why, is Downe Church like a Golden Sovereign?' Answer: Because it has the Queens Head on one side and the George and dragon on the other', still holds good today, for if you are fortunate enough to own one of these gold coins you will see a portrait of our present Queen on one side and on the obverse, St George defeating the dragon. St Mary's Church dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and whilst both pubs are somewhat younger there was almost certainly an Inn in the village when Queen Elizabeth I passed by on her way to Downe Court. A much later popular royal proclamation said that 'if a village hath a church, it could also have two pubs!' This once familiar pattern could be seen throughout the land. Charles Darwin, a long time resident of Downe and living in the village when he wrote his revolutionary book on *The Origin of Species*, was a regular visitor to the George in an official capacity. Family legend also has it that he nipped over the stile into the snug of the Queens having parked his horse strategically behind the church! More recently, the Queens Head was the local of the Knox-Johnson family and their famous son Robin, later Sir Robin, who was the first man to sail single handedly around the world non-stop. One of the bars commemorates this epic journey, whilst over in the church there is a somewhat premature commemorative window when he was thought to be lost at sea. The Sammé family, father and son, longtime publicans of The George and Dragon had their own hero in their son Harold who served in the RAF during the last war, first as a gunner and then a bomb aimer and completed some 70 missions over occupied Europe, when 30 was considered the maximum if you were lucky enough to survive. Harold was a quiet man and never spoke of his exploits, but it was

said in the Squadron that if Harold was part of your crew, you would return. Tens of thousands of those gallant men never did. Both pubs were well patronized by the military from nearby Biggin Hill where pilots would often arrive on bicycles freewheeling down from the pond with both legs sticking out to do one circuit of the tree in the middle of the square before descending with a clatter into one of the bars. The Queens Head was favourite of the American Eagle Squadron, volunteer pilots who came to help us during those troubled times, whilst the Saloon Bar in the George was the favourite of RAF Officers, and at least one American General on the run-up to D-Day during 1944 when the whole of Southern England was one gigantic army camp as men waited for the invasion of occupied Europe. Downe has changed little down the centuries and is experiencing something of a renaissance with the anniversary of Darwin and his famous book which caused such a stir around the world in those far-off Victorian days, with both pubs serving good food and beer as they always have down the centuries. Whilst the six bells of St Mary's seem to say 'Why don't you come to church?' On a clear day, if you listen carefully, you can hear Cudham church reply with extra bells 'I am far too drunk, I can not go'!!

Author: Geoff Greensmith



St Marys Church at Downe, which has stood the test of time for 700 years plus had as one of its parishioners Charles Darwin for a time, until he became disillusioned with religion, in favour of a beer.

## AIRFIELD PERSONALITIES



Peter Prescott came to Biggin Hill Airport in 1962 as a young man seeking a career in aviation. He ventured into the Surrey & Kent Flying Club asking if there were any jobs in the hangar. He was told he could have a job to gain experience, but they couldn't afford to pay him any money. He returned home despondent and told his father of his predicament. His father came to his rescue and offered to support him with pocket money and pay his National Health Stamp. The current Chief Engineer at that time taught Peter how to spread sawdust on the hangar floor to soak up the oil in a single arm swinging motion akin to that of a farmer sowing oats in a freshly ploughed furrow spreading the seed evenly.

Over the next couple of years, Peter would gather a cache of information on aircraft maintenance and procedures. Surrey & Kent changed hands in 1968 with John Delaney as the new owner. Peter by now, was working alongside 'Cobby' who was also becoming an established airfield character. During these early years, security of employment within aviation wasn't considered of great importance. This was soon forgotten over a drink in one of the many flying club bars scattered around the airfield at the end of a days work. Aah.! for the return of those glorious moments in time, when everyone appeared to be equal.

Many flying clubs formed at Biggin Hill during the 60's following the closure of Croydon

Airport in 1959 and there seemed to be a market for a central maintenance unit at Biggin Hill for the many club aircraft. In the mid to late 60's, Peter, in conjunction with Cobby, formed a company called 'Ace Check' operating from a mobile unit. An old ex army wireless vehicle which was duly painted yellow and used as a mobile office, tool store etc. Later they came to an arrangement with the Airport Manger to house this vehicle in the hangar at night for security and in return they would operate the airfield emergency fire services. The alarm was wired direct to the hangar, and when the claxon sounded they would down tools and race across the airfield to the rescue..!?

1968 saw the arrival of Fairflight, operating a DH Dove aircraft occupying the other end of the 'T' hangar. Ace Check continued to maintain the aircraft of S&K Flying Club whilst rebuilding a Gypsy Moth and repairing others. There was no shortage of other planes requiring some form of immediate attention. 1970 saw the formation of another flying club named 'Kingair' which was owned by Gordon King (a former S&K member and ex Renault car dealer) he offered his maintenance to Ace Check.

1974 S&K would change hands yet again and Peter was beginning to look over the partition which separated S&K from Fairflight and was beginning to think of '*tin aeroplanes*' as he put it. Bigger aircraft were more of a challenge and this should be the 'order of the day'. The partnership of Ace Check was dissolved. Peter formed a company called Avtech, moved into the old 'Bernie Fell' hangar and began maintaining more advanced piston engine aircraft progressing to small business jet aircraft.

Business expanded and was going quite nicely until the Hurricane of 1987 which swept across southern UK, which created chaos at Biggin

Hill and many other airfields during the night of 16<sup>th</sup> October, severely bending the old hangar rendering it unsafe to work in. Many Biggin based aircraft were seriously damaged, with some



22 aircraft blown over as wind speeds reach 80/104 knots.



Peter attempted to get to the airfield during the night, without success, being thwarted by the many fallen trees. Another hangar was leased during the rebuild of the old hangar.



The new hangar today has a pleasant appearance enclosing a comfortable environment for maintaining executive aircraft.



Peter still has the same charisma he arrived with all those years ago, as if it were yesterday. Pictures adorn the walls of his office, his desk is piled high with papers, a pen in one hand writing continuously into a ledger, a spare pen atop an ear and an unlit fag in the other hand, ready for a quick smokey..!! JB

A COLLAGE OF LEIGHBRIDGE 'GARDEN PARTY' 11<sup>th</sup> JULY 2009



